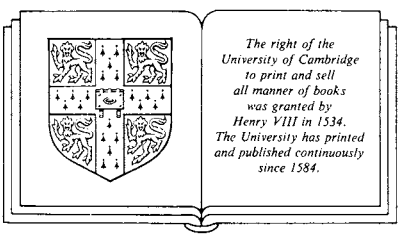
POETRY IN A DIVIDED WORLD

The Clark Lectures 1985

HENRY GIFFORD
Emeritus Professor of English and Comparative Literature
University of Bristol



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1986

Printed in Great Britain at
the University Press, Cambridge

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gifford, Henry
Poetry in a divided world.—(The Clark
lectures; 1985)
1. Poetry
I. Title II. Series
808.1 PN1031

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gifford, Henry.
Poetry in a divided world.
(The Clark lectures; 1985)
Bibliography; p.
1. Poetry, Modern—20th century—History and
criticism—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Literature
and society—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Title.
II. Series.
PN1271.G47 1986 821'.914'09 85-18988

ISBN 0 521 30944 1

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CHAPTER 1

THE FUNCTION OF POETRY AT THE PRESENT TIME

Since I am embarking upon an apology for poetry, a brief personal apology may also be allowed. All my teaching life was concerned with English literature, and at a later stage to some degree with American; but most of my spare time went to the study of Russian writers – notably Pushkin and Tolstoy, with a precursor of modern poetry, Fyodor Tyutchev, and so to Blok and Pasternak. In recent years I have become greatly interested in the Russian poets contemporary with Pasternak. To hold in balance two great literatures, English and Russian, is to be made aware of important differences in their traditions, while none the less noting how manifestly they belong to a single culture. My generation, which grew up (to put it charitably) in the nineteen thirties, was plunged immediately into the divided and perplexed era that has continued to this day. We could recognise and abhor fascism, the undisputed evil at the heart of Europe. What too many of us would not concede was that the Soviet Union showed more than a few hideous parallels with Nazi Germany. But those who were drawn to Russian literature, through an original sympathy with Russian politics, did at least have the good fortune to find in it a new perspective for viewing our own literature of the time. It soon became clear that the function

and status of poetry in Russia, and in Eastern Europe generally, did not correspond to their function and status as mainly understood in Western Europe and America. It was also plain that the modern poetry of Russia in particular held a growing significance for the present time, not only because of its depth and richness, but also because it seemed to speak directly to what could, sooner or later, become our own needs.

In attempting to survey some of the problems that confront poets today, I have been compelled to limit the range of enquiry. Much of what I shall say about Anglo-American poetry centres upon Eliot, and many of his statements will be familiar. On the other side (and by no means always as adversaries) Mandelstam will be often invoked, and also at times Marina Tsvetaeva, and the Russian poet nearest to him among his contemporaries, Anna Akhmatova. Beside them will appear a less likely figure, perhaps, George Seferis. He is chosen partly by reason of his own experience and that of his country, but equally because his critical writings, on a level with his poetry, are finely perceptive and bear on more than the situation of modern Greece. These are not the only poets I shall mention, but it is from them that I have learned most.

T. S. Eliot gave his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, at a moment when the portents of violent change were visible. It was the winter of 1932–3, when Hitler came to power, Stalin had taken the decisive steps towards a personal dictatorship, and America found itself deep in crisis, turning to Franklin Roosevelt. The modern world was now set irreversibly on its course. But the process had begun earlier, as Lawrence's comment in *Kangaroo* will remind us:

It was in 1915 that the old world ended. In the winter 1915–1916 the spirit of the old London collapsed; the city, in some way, perished, perished from being a heart of the world, and became a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears and horrors.

In Russia Vladimir Mayakovsky was prophesying that the year 1916 would wear revolution like a crown of thorns. His prophecy, though a little impatient in its dating, was substantially right. Much later Akhmatova was to describe how, in the last winter before the war, there drew near to St Petersburg 'the real, not the calendar, twentieth century'.

Lawrence, it must be admitted, sounds not far from hysteria, with the 'vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears and horrors'. The whole chapter in *Kangaroo* telling of his ordeal in an inimical society during wartime bears a frenzied note. And yet the calmest appraisal of events in the last seventy years cannot dispense with such terms as horror and the perishing of cities. When Matthew Arnold spoke on 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', it was in a time that now seems remote from our own. He could not have foreseen how much degradation and fear lay in store for the twentieth century. 'As for misery', Wilfred Owen protested in 1917 about Tennyson, 'was he ever frozen alive with dead men for comforters? [. . .] Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child. So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel.'

Twice in his lectures Eliot quoted Norton himself on 'a new stage of experience' that lay before mankind – this he had predicted in letters of 1869 and 1896 – and on the 'new discipline of suffering' it would impose. The suffering in this century has put an intolerable strain on the human spirit. Owen's misery in the trenches – 'frozen alive with dead men

for comforters' – does not mark the furthest limit of ordeal. His conscience, he felt, was 'very seared' because he had been obliged as a soldier to disobey the teaching of 'pure Christianity'. Nevertheless, his choice to do this had been free. More terrible assaults on conscience have befallen thousands upon thousands since, not in war but in civil life. There are more paralysing fears than even Beaumont Hamel could inspire.

When Norton, and Eliot also, referred to 'our civilisation', they had in mind Western Europe and the United States. Eastern Europe for Eliot lay outside the civilisation for whose future he feared:

> Who are these hooded hordes swarming
> Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth,
> Ringed by the flat horizon only [. . .]

The 'hooded hordes' evoke memories of the Tatars, and perhaps of the Vandals and Huns who had preceded them. An earlier draft of this passage in *The Waste Land* had designated the plains as Polish. Eliot, the most deeply committed of English-speaking poets in his age to European values, was never willing to accord Eastern Europe an equal share in our common inheritance. This makes highly relevant another set of Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, *The Witness of Poetry*, given in 1981–2 by Czeslaw Milosz. He was born in 1911 at Vilna, 'on the very borderline', as he puts it, 'between Rome and Byzantium', though he hesitates to invoke those historical names. The West–East axis that began with the rift between the Latin and Greek Churches has persisted in Europe, but Milosz is careful to say that it 'constantly

takes on new forms'. He complains that until very recent days the literary map of Europe drawn in the West revealed a virtual blank from the farther side of Germany until it came to Moscow (and he might have added St Petersburg/Leningrad). For young intellectuals born like himself in those slighted regions it was a certainty, as he says in one poem, that 'the capital of the world' could only be Paris, to which Milosz himself went, as 'a young barbarian'. The catastrophes that later befell both Paris and his native Poland convinced him that everything had changed: 'There is no capital of the world, neither here [in Paris] nor anywhere else.' In his Norton lectures he turns continually to the experience of those living on the 'endless plains' as something from which poets everywhere can take their lesson.

The 'divided world' in which we are to consider the place of poetry is that surveyed by Milosz – the area once known as Christendom, with its extensions across the Atlantic. These include, if only by implication, Latin America. In the old Europe a single culture supported one religion, in its Roman and Greek forms; and, so far as poetry is concerned, that unity still prevails. There may be a tinge of parochialism in calling this a world, but what I shall have to say about it is probably not untrue on a global scale. The same conditions are beginning to show everywhere; the same drastic confrontations between an older way of life, rapidly losing its hold upon the unspeculative mass of men and women, and what is indeed 'a new stage of experience'.

I shall come back later to Milosz' views, for he raises many important issues, and much of what he has to say is borne out by my reading of Russian poetry. But first we should con-

sider some indications of the way poetry was regarded, East and West, in the decade or so before the Second World War. At the beginning of the century it had done a great deal, through the Symbolist movement, to regain the central position in literature yielded some fifty years earlier to the prose novel. The new hegemony was not absolute, rather it might be termed a sharing of power; but the driving force – more noticeably in some literatures than in others – tended once again to be poetry. What was written by the generation of poets that made itself known around 1910 will surely stand as a remarkable achievement. And yet to hear what, within a few decades, poets were saying about the degree of public respect for their art is to encounter a sense of uneasiness and uncertainty, most of all in the West.

Robert Lowell said that in the late thirties, when he was studying at Kenyon College under John Crowe Ransom, 'no profession seemed wispier and less needed than that of the poet'. These were years of increasing political commitment, in which a serious poet of the strictest integrity, the American George Oppen, had given up writing verse for what turned out to be twenty-five years, because, he explained: 'When the crisis occurred [in 1929] we knew we didn't know what the world was [...] And I thought most of the poets didn't know about the world as a life.' The situation in America was well described by Lionel Trilling in an essay that noted the indulgence of liberal intellectuals to Theodore Dreiser and their severity towards Henry James. 'With that juxtaposition', he wrote, 'we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.' Trilling's essay was entitled 'Reality in America', and this comment

dates from 1946, though it was equally true of the previous decade. Radical thinking, whether in the West during the 1930s or again at the present time, or in Russia during the later nineteenth century and afterwards, has always insisted on its unique claim to interpret 'reality'. Aleksandr Blok, soon after the February revolution in 1917, asked himself the crucial question: 'Does democracy need the artist?' By democracy he meant the revolutionary movement to which Russian radicals had dedicated themselves for a century. The question invariably arises in a pressing political context; and our age lives in the grip of politics.

It is easy for poets in the West to despair of their art being taken seriously, now that the literary scene is dominated by journalism. Not long ago John Ashbery was reported as saying in an interview that 'poetry is a hopelessly minor art'. *The Times*, to console him, I should imagine, published his interview under the heading 'The major genius of a minor art'. Ashbery conceded that 'there are many more interesting things to do' than to read poetry. His diffidence (if it was that, and not simply desertion in face of the enemy) had been anticipated by an unquestionably major poet, George Seferis. *Logbook I*, the volume of verse he published in 1940, carried an epigraph from Hölderlin – the painful outcry in 'Brot und Wein' which tells of the poet's loneliness, his uncertainty about what should be said or done in a time of perpetual waiting. He is led to exclaim: '*wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*' which Seferis translated: 'And the poets, what use are they in a mean-spirited time [*s ena mikropsycho kairo*]?' *Mikropsychos* is a word used by the orators Isocrates and Demosthenes, and by Aristotle in the *Ethics*; it carries a moral weight perhaps

stronger than *dürftig* implies. Hölderlin in 1801 was lamenting that he could not hope to converse with the gods of Hellas: for him, as Keats would fear in 1818, it seemed too late a day to have 'touched the beautiful mythology of Greece'. Seferis, we learn from an article written in these years, rejected Hölderlin's romantic vision which did not relate to the Hellenism he understood. The question asked by Hölderlin had for him another significance. What troubled him profoundly was the lack of direction in Greece and generally in the modern world.

Seferis is a European poet necessary to know because his problems, which were those of his people, concern our common civilisation now and in the future. When he asked in the thirties what use are the poets, he seems already to have known what it should be. His own work from that time onwards gave a positive answer.

Like others in that region of Europe he had been brought early face to face with calamity. His birthplace, the Greek city of Smyrna on the Turkish mainland, was lost for ever to Hellenism in 1922 by the folly of King Constantine and his prime minister Gounaris. The 'Asia Minor disaster', as the Greeks call it, awakened Seferis to the instability of modern civilisation, and to the imperative need to define and preserve a truly Greek culture. When the liberation movement began almost two centuries ago, it had been given a voice by the poets. Solomos and Kalvos, attempting to write in the living tongue of the people, inspired the resistance much as Mickiewicz did that of the oppressed Poles. Seferis was already convinced, before he had to endure the further disasters of Greece in the Second World War, that the Greek

classics could only be brought into the present through a live contemporary culture, to be found in the language of the people, the demotic, and there alone. He believed that by using this language the writer could achieve truthfulness in his work and so become genuinely Hellenic.

Vittorio Sereni, an Italian poet whose unhappy experience in Athens during 1942 as a member of the Axis occupying forces led him to the study and appreciation of Seferis, singled out a poem entitled 'The Last Day'. It had been written in Athens at the beginning of 1939, and it appears in *Logbook I*. The poem describes a day of unbroken cloud, in which none of the decisions urgently needed are made. The soldiers present arms in the drizzle, but nothing is settled of more significance than the name for the wind blowing – 'not a north-easter, the sirocco':

> And yet we knew that by daybreak for us would remain
> nothing more, neither the woman at our side drinking sleep,
> nor the recollection that once we had been men [. . .]

The poem returns to this theme near the ending:

> By daybreak for us there would remain nothing: total surrender;
> not even our hands;
> and our women working for strangers at the well-heads,
> and our children
> in quarries.

Sereni notes that this was written under the dictatorship of Metaxas and that it foresees the war which came to Greece the following year and also Seferis' exile. He links it with what Seferis had written elsewhere in prose about the sudden ruin of a world that had been living, its customs and rituals,

and the nexus of its life. In Seferis he recognised 'an inheritance of ancestral memory that is nature and blood even more than a culture'. Hector in the *Iliad* – as Seferis' translators into English, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, point out – prophesied that his wife would one day draw water, much against her will, in another place. The quarries, they note, in which the children must labour recall those of Syracuse where Thucydides tells that the Athenian prisoners were thrown after their expedition failed in 413 B.C. These examples, of course, belong to 'culture', but supporting them is the long tradition of facing disaster which has truly become for the Greeks 'an inheritance of national memory'.

Seferis, then, made it his task, particularly in the period of exile and defeat from 1941 until 1944, to establish and repossess the tradition of Hellenism. A poem he wrote in the Transvaal among the agapanthi, alien flowers bearing a Greek name, comes near to capitulation:

> It is heavy and hard, the living do not suffice me:
> first since they do not speak, and moreover
> because I ought to question the dead
> so that I may proceed farther.

But the African lilies 'hold the dead speechless'. That was in his despair when he lost the northern constellations and with them the Hellenic world and Europe. Recovery came through lonely meditation on the Greek experience in its modern phase. He took with him to South Africa a volume of Aeschylus, he was lent the poems of Cavafy; he reflected on the forerunners of modern Greek poetry, Solomos and

Kalvos, and the restraints upon them, only half at home as they were in the living language; and he spoke movingly to his countrymen in Alexandria and Cairo about a simple hero of the Greek War of Independence, Makriyannis, the peasant who became a general and taught himself letters to write his autobiography. What made him for Seferis 'the humblest but also the most constant teacher' (even more, one suspects, than Socrates of the *Apology*) was an impersonal love of justice, and a quality he shared with the primitive painter, Theophilos – his 'intense and active culture', more valuable than any formal education. In the speech Seferis made in 1963 when receiving the Nobel Prize, he described his country as a rocky peninsula in the Mediterranean, with only three assets – the struggle of its inhabitants, the sea, and the light of the sun. Their language from ancient times had been permeated with the desire for justice and the love of humanity. Greek poetry showed this. Now at last he could affirm that in a world tyrannised by fear and disquiet there was need for poetry. 'It is', he declared, 'an act of faith'.

In the West there are not so many who would grant to poetry the significance claimed for it by Seferis. It is only, as Milosz observes, 'when an entire community is struck by misfortune' – and he instances the Nazi occupation of Poland – that 'poetry becomes as essential as bread'. Yet the belief, expressed in that very image, has found passionate adherents elsewhere. Mandelstam at a time of great personal distress affirmed it and Marina Tsvetaeva likewise; Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo use the same image. Milosz quotes a letter from Simone Weil in the summer of 1941, when France had known catastrophe: she said that 'the writers of

the period just ended are responsible for the miseries of our time'. The first half of our century, she maintained, was marked by 'the weakening and near disappearance of the notion of value'. Seferis described, in his lecture on Makriyannis, the main activity of European intellectuals between the two World Wars as a search for reality in life, which the moment it was touched became ashes.

Simone Weil was attacking the Dadaists and Surrealists, and her charge of moral insouciance is well founded. It could not be applied to the most influential exponent of poetry in the English-speaking world at that time, Eliot, nor to Eliot's associate and mentor at the beginning of his career, Ezra Pound. In *Lustra* (1916) Pound instructed his songs to

> Move among the lovers of perfection alone.
> Seek ever to stand in the hard Sophoclean light
> And take your wounds from it gladly.

The lovers of perfection are addressed in another poem:

> O helpless few in my country,
> O remnant enslaved!

They are 'artists, broken against her [. . .] /Lovers of beauty, starved [. . .] /You of the finer sense'. In another poem, he declares to the songs: 'Let us take up arms against this sea of stupidities.' The 'hard Sophoclean light' of Pound should not be mistaken for the illumination Seferis gained from Aeschylus. As an exile in Johannesburg, he had been overcome when reading Prometheus' invocation to 'the divine ether' and 'all-seeing circle of the sun' – first, because Prometheus is calling for justice, but also because Seferis himself had an almost mystical feeling for the Greek light. In the

same way as a chorale by Bach it gave him an assurance of all that was indestructible in humanity. Pound's 'hard Sophoclean light' is properly the medium for Imagist poetry (after the 'mists and fogs' since the nineties): it may wound, but only by showing the inadequacies of his art.

This declaration of Pound may seem to have more in common with Pater than the modern world, and his objectionable politics of a later period were those of a muddled man who remained primarily an aesthete. Eliot was more than that, as his religious concerns make clear. He committed himself to a lecture on 'The Social Function of Poetry' which was addressed significantly to the British-Norwegian Institute in 1943, when Norway itself had fallen into enemy hands. In it he made the claim for poetry that it performed a social function in the 'largest sense', because it could 'affect the speech and sensibility of the whole nation'. Without poetry, he believed, 'people everywhere would cease to be able to express, and consequently be able to feel, the emotions of civilised beings'. Thus for Eliot the healthy condition of poetry is at once the support and the index of a civilisation.

But is there reliable evidence that poetry, in Eliot's words, 'actually makes a difference to the society as a whole'? Pound before him had insisted that when 'the application of word to thing goes rotten', the effect upon 'thought and order', both individual and social, is disastrous. The examples of Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s add weight to this argument. The debasement of language, once it is used to obfuscate rather than to establish the truth, breeds cynicism. It may not be the sole cause of social decline, but it does contribute to this powerfully. Indeed the language of advertisers,

of public relations and the carefully created 'image', which plays so prominent a role in the free world, has brought a new kind of insincerity into our lives, and literature is not untouched by this. Pound was speaking of literature in general, but reminded us that 'the language of prose is much less highly charged' than the language of poetry. That being granted, does society, which Eliot conceded must include all those people who are indifferent to poetry, depend for the finer tuning of its moral sensibilities on this neglected art?

He maintains that 'civilised beings' must understand their emotions in order to live fully; emotions that cannot be made articulate will die. This assertion seems to rely upon the experience of an age with which he felt more sympathy than with his own. Eliot's idea of a social function for poetry requires endorsement from a settled order that can be recognised as a civilisation, even if the ideal is often besmirched in practice.

Such a civilisation existed in England for some fifty or sixty years before the civil war, when even a lesser poet like Samuel Daniel could feel assured of his place in literature and of the value of what he did:

> I know I shall be read, among the rest,
> So long as men speak English, and so long
> As verse and virtue shall be in request [. . .]

Those are the accents of a reasonable confidence. It makes no extravagant claims, but in that modest qualification, 'among the rest', acknowledges that the poet is one of a fraternity, which determines his standing, and also enables him to assume it.

Daniel in 1607 upheld a natural connection between poetry and morality: 'so long/As verse and virtue shall be in request'. Verse may meet with indifference; it has to be 'in request', freely called for. But a Christian and humanist of his day never regarded virtue as an amenity, a mere grace of civilisation. By refusing to separate verse from virtue, Daniel seeks to prove the necessity of verse. Only a dozen years before, the posthumous edition of Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* had re-affirmed the seriousness of its dealings with moral truth, inculcating as it did 'magnanimity and justice'. These qualities, one may suggest, are often glaringly absent – the first even more than the second – from the public life of the twentieth century. Is there still a prospect that poetry could restore them?

Wordsworth declared that the poet succeeds in so far as he is able 'to call forth and communicate *power*'. The idea was taken up by Hazlitt and De Quincey; it reverberates imposingly through a whole generation of poets. There is a note of melancholy in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth recognises that 'the hiding-places' of his power may in time be almost entirely closed. But, whatever his personal anxiety, the affirmation holds: poetry, for Wordsworth and for the romantic poets everywhere, is something to be measured by power. Nor can Arnold avoid this criterion when discussing Wordsworth himself or Byron or Shelley. It is not something that usually comes to mind in relation to the poetry of this age. 'Poetry', said Auden, 'makes nothing happen', even though 'it survives,/A way of happening, a mouth.'

He said this in his elegy for Yeats, who died in January 1939. Nearly three years before, some memorable words

were uttered by Osip Mandelstam. The place and occasion could hardly have been more incongruous; the strangeness of it all gives a solemnity to what was said.

Anna Akhmatova had gone to visit Mandelstam and his wife in Voronezh (some three hundred miles south of Moscow) where he was living in extreme poverty as an exile. For Akhmatova too the conditions of life had become almost unbearable. It was the beginning of 1936; very soon the Great Terror would paralyse the country. Neither Mandelstam nor Akhmatova now seemed to have their place among living poets. The state had prevented them from publishing any more verse in their total isolation. It was then, as his widow recalls, that Mandelstam declared 'Poetry is power' – an astonishing affirmation in the circumstances. Akhmatova bowed her head in assent. For all their hardships and dangers this remained for them indisputable. Nadezhda Mandelstam looked on the scene with wonder. 'Banished, sick, penniless and hounded', she comments, 'they still would not give up their power.' And Mandelstam, she thought, had the bearing of one who wields it. His argument was unanswerable: there must be respect for poetry when it was rewarded with punishment and death.

Shortly afterwards Akhmatova wrote a poem entitled 'Voronezh':

> And the city stands all frozen over,
> As though under glass the trees, walls, snow.
> On the crystals I walk unsurely.
> Patterned sledges waver in their course.
> And above Peter of Vorónezh are the crows,
> And poplars, and a vault of light green,

Washed and dull, in the sunny motes,
And the battle of Kulikóvo yet breathes
From slopes of the mighty, victorious land.
And the poplars, like glasses brought together,
Ring out at once above us more strongly,
As though they drank to our exultation
At a wedding feast for a thousand guests.

Hardly less surprising than Mandelstam's assertion is the tone of Akhmatova's poem, after such a visit. In that ice-bound city where she had seen his destitution she is uplifted by a feeling of celebration, of triumph. She recalls two events in Russian history connected with Voronezh – Dimitry of the Don's victory over the Tatar horde nearby, on the field of Kulikovo, and the building there of a flotilla in the 1720s by Peter the Great. As so often in her poetry, there are allusions to Pushkin. The festive close brings to mind his account of Peter's revelling after the victory of Poltava. The 'vault of light green' recalls a 'vault of pale green' in a poem by Pushkin on the splendour and misery of St Petersburg, where 'the spirit of bondage' contrasts with harmonious architecture. There is a further hint of uneasiness in the hazards of walking over the Voronezh ice, and the wobbling of the sledges. But she must still recognise the jubilation in which nature and the city with its glorious past are at one.

Afterwards she added four lines to the poem which alter the whole perspective, by stating baldly what before she had hinted at. They could not be published until very near the end of her life:

While in the room of the disgraced poet
Terror and the Muse keep watch by turns.

And night sets in
That is unknowing of any dawn.

Mandelstam's 'disgrace' is *opala*, on which the lexicographer Dahl comments: 'In ancient times the imperial disfavour [*opala*] [...] involved [...] exile and utter ruin'. Akhmatova whispered those lines to her friend Lydia Chukovskaya, who wrote in her diary: 'Terror and the Muse! In these two words is the key to the life of our poets.'

Through Mandelstam particularly a tradition of public responsibility, long established in Russian literature, was brought to a new focus. His understanding of the poet's role and the depth of his commitment, though exceptional in the clarity with which he expressed them, are not unique either in Russia or elsewhere in Eastern Europe. It might be protested that Rilke, to give one outstanding example, was quite as serious in his dedication, and that he too made every sacrifice that he thought was needed. But Rilke was not tested in the same way: the terror he knew was metaphysical, not an experience imposed by other people and shared with thousands. Milosz demands of poetry what it could offer in modern Poland – 'a peculiar fusion of the individual and the historical' so that 'events burdening a whole community are perceived by the poet as touching him in a most personal manner'. The poetry of the modern age has been almost invariably lyrical. Even its longer poems usually take the form of a lyrical diary, the record of privileged moments worked into a sequence. Its triumph, of which Mandelstam gives conspicuous proof, can be found in the extension it has achieved for the lyrical mode, through being constantly aware of private experience in the light of history. I do not

forget that 'History', with its inexorable demands and its dustbins for those who fail to meet them, is one of the most dangerous abstractions now at play. But the history understood by poets is seldom that which the politician invokes to vindicate his aims. A mind like Mandelstam's, when exposed to history, can attain the impersonality of great drama. His verse is in the line of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, despite all the difference of form.

Once Peter the Great had taken control of the Orthodox Church in Russia, he made, as Viktor Frank has said, 'a profound spiritual vacuum', to be filled subsequently by the writers. The true voice of conscience was to be heard in literature, from the end of the eighteenth century when the writer constituted himself spokesman of the oppressed. Frank cites the famous poem that Pushkin wrote the year after the Decembrist rising of 1825 had been put down, 'The Prophet'. Its religious intensity, he says, could scarcely have been expected from this poet, very much a man of the enlightenment in education and tastes. Pushkin takes from Isaiah his image of a seraph who appears to the poet in a desert region, touches his eyes and ears, replacing his tongue with a serpent's sting, and his heart with a live coal:

> And then God's voice called unto me:
> 'Arise, prophet, and look, and heed,
> Be possessed wholly with my will
> And, coursing over seas and land,
> Fire with the word the hearts of men'.

Frank does not exaggerate when he says that for the new class

of intellectuals in Russia literature became their church. Hence the anxiety of governments, under the Tsar or the Soviets, to keep the writers in check, to mobilise them on the side of authority, to smother the fire if it burned too fiercely. And not only in Russia but throughout Eastern Europe poetry has become the spearhead of resistance. Put in the plainest terms its function is to rebuild what ideology has laid waste.

Theodor Adorno believed that the horror of Auschwitz made poetry impossible to write, and his opinion is often quoted. Earlier we find Yeats complaining that a number of English poets, and Wilfred Owen in particular, had felt bound to describe modern war in terms of passive suffering. With such an attitude, 'It is no longer possible', he argued, 'to write *The Persians*, *Agincourt*, *Chevy Chase*; some blunderer has driven his car on the wrong side of the road – that is all.' The Somme or the Holocaust – they are the same in their total destruction of any human perspective. Yeats himself could write of civil war in Ireland when it was made up of separate incidents to be recorded:

somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned [. . .]

Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood [. . .]

When Achilles contends with the river in the *Iliad*, he is an individual hero at war with the elemental. But when lives are annihilated in their thousands, and all sense of identity is wiped out, what can poetry do but fall silent? In the devastated areas that have been such a feature of recent

history, language rings hollow. The words that should denote human values are the paper money of a bankrupt community. What voices are still audible when you reap the whirlwind?

That appeared to be the situation to some poets in Poland forty years ago, and equally to poets in Germany when it came to its senses again. Ours is a century preoccupied with language, its ability to conceal thought, to set limits upon it, to hold sometimes a despotic sway over minds, or to sink into a morass of ambiguities. With a growing awareness of the subconscious, the irrational in human behaviour, and of language's complicity with these forces, the coherence of life seems to have gone. It can only be presented, as too many writers believe, in terms of the absurd. The human mind is increasingly trapped in a technology that issues its own imperatives, while the affections, the 'sympathies of men' that engaged Wordsworth, are becoming destitute.

Ezra Pound began his essay 'The Serious Artist' – one of many programmatic statements – by remarking: 'It is curious that one should be asked to rewrite Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* in the year of grace 1913.' This defence has to be made in every generation, and Pound conducted it for his time with great vigour and earnestness. He addresses the class always with ruler in hand, and we may fidget under his flow of certitudes; yet in matters of art Pound's instinct was very sure. What he demanded in the essay was 'good art', and this he explains as 'art that bears true witness'. The question of the witness that poetry bears is a large one, to be taken up later. Enough to say here that the valid testimony of someone who was there requires what Pasternak called, in relation to